

Written Statement

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Briefing on: “Silencing Religious Freedom in Africa: The Impact of Speech Restrictions”

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Chairman Perkins, commissioners, and distinguished guests: Thank you for convening this timely conversation and producing the report that you are launching today. The global debate on the balance of religious liberty and free expression will increasingly be shaped by the way these issues are pondered and decided in sub-Saharan Africa, home to some of the fastest-growing societies on earth.

I am the head of Global Affairs and Partnerships at Search for Common Ground, one of the world’s largest conflict resolution non-governmental organizations. Alongside traditional mediation, dialogue, and community actions, Search produces about 400 hours of original radio and television programs each month, reaching more than 50 million people¹ around the world, ranging from civics game shows in the Democratic Republic of Congo to radio dramas in Sierra Leone. Search is not aligned to any religious tradition, and we work closely with faith-based and non-faith based partners to foster tolerance and uphold dignity in every society.

We aim to promote healthy, safe, and just societies across the continent, including in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, and other countries mentioned in the report. We syndicate our programming across more than 200 outlets across the continent, so these issues are near and dear to Search’s mission and interests. That said, while my testimony is informed by my experience with Search for Common Ground, the opinions and recommendations are mine alone. As we look at regulations on hate speech, blasphemy, and apostasy, I would like to focus my attention on societies that are already experiencing high levels of violence and conflict.

Three Issues in Deeply Conflict- and Violence-Affected States in Africa

Institutional constraints and social norms. As we look at limits to free expression in conflict-affected societies, it is appropriate to focus on institutional and legal barriers, as much analysis

¹ Search for Common Ground, 2017. *Conflict Reimagined: 2017 Annual Progress Report*. [\[Link\]](#).

does. At the same time, it is impossible to understand these barriers without also understanding the social norms that determine what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Legal systems operate within Society, and Society—each of us—helps to determine what expression is expected and accepted in the public square. Explicit and implicit norms shape what one can say without fear of reprisal, whether from the police or a neighbor, from an armed group or an angry mob.

Social norms are contested. Few topics that are as woven into the fabric of the human experience as faith is. Faith shapes how we live and how we die; how we structure our communities and how we see the world structured around us. Because faith is so deeply woven into individual lives, few strings, when pulled or exploited, provide a greater opportunity for manipulation. Whether in political competition or amidst armed conflict, actors seek to pull on faith, the strongest of ties to draw support to their cause. As a result, many actors see an incentive to convert any conflict, no matter how base or material the stakes, into a matter of religious identity. We have seen this process in the Central African Republic, Nigeria, and many other societies across Africa and the world

Rapid technological change. Second, the advent of new communications technologies—in Africa as in the U.S.—has brought into contact people who otherwise never would have found each other. Mass and interactive media technologies have lowered barriers and given each of us a platform and a voice to speak and listen to the wider world. It is easier to find support and solidarity, to grow and to learn. It is also easier to enter into profound disagreements than ever before. We can enter into conflict with the swipe of a finger on a screen, but human nature is no better at managing conflict. Extraordinary technological growth without a similar evolution in our ability to manage conflict means that societies are simultaneously coming together and falling apart.

While communications technologies have driven radical transformations in every society, the change in Africa has been astounding. If you consider a 60-year old woman living in the Central African Republic, she was born at a time when she would have been very lucky to have a radio. And all she could listen to was the official broadcast controlled by the colonial powers and possibly a missionary station. Now, she lives in an age of Whatsapp. As much as our own society is struggling with hate speech, incitement to violence, and definitions of acceptable expression in social media posts and public discourse, these struggles are even greater on a continent that, 55 years ago, contained barely more than half-a-million televisions.²

Liberty and security. So the norms have shifted quickly. In African societies, as everywhere else, there is a robust public conversation on the appropriate limits and boundaries of speech. For

² UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1988, as cited in Durham, M.G. & Kellner, 2009. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*. John Wiley & Sons.

example, the Afrobarometer research network surveyed about 25,000 Africans across 34 societies on the role of the government in regulating religious speech. Nearly half (49%) believe strongly or somewhat that there should be absolute freedom of religion with no government monitoring or interference. Almost the same amount (47%) believe the exact opposite, that governments have a regular responsibility to monitor speech that they consider dangerous or forbidden.³ Those numbers apply to most of the African societies surveyed. Within nearly every faith tradition surveyed, whether Catholic, Muslim, Mormon, or Quaker, there was a significant minority of 10% or more who would like to see greater restrictions in the name of security. As in the U.S., the debate over boundaries of religious freedom is ongoing throughout the religious landscape of African societies.

Case Study: “Common Ground” Approaches in the Central African Republic

Debates over the appropriate role of censorship and government control of hate speech can set up a false choice between freedom and security. To illustrate alternatives, I would like to cite a personally familiar example from the Central African Republic. In April of last year, a United Nations operation against a Muslim criminal organization turned badly, and a number of people were killed. In May there was an attack on a Catholic church in the capital. Fifteen people were killed, including a priest. In revenge, 22 Muslims were killed. The violence escalated quickly. In the next month, 15 people were killed a day. As the violence escalated, people were not just killed but killed in graphic ways such as burnings and beheadings—attacks designed to inflict massive psychological as well as bodily harm.

In that context, Search’s general “contact us” email address received an email from the media regulators of the Central African Republic, the Haut Conseil de Communication (HCC). The HCC had seen an uptick in hate speech as the violence unfolded, and they were struggling to respond. As the government-sanctioned regulatory body, the HCC had been enforcing regulations by censoring radio stations and taking them off the air when dangerous speech arose, but with only 28 registered independent stations in the country,⁴ once you start removing stations, very little remains. The HCC was looking for alternatives. They reached out to us asking for a partnership, and we reached out to USAID, who agreed to launch a rapid response via their Human Rights Support Mechanism.

Multi-stakeholder, Inclusive Processes to Set Norms. My Central African colleagues worked with the media regulators to bring in the faith communities, victims advocates, and psychologists who had been working with trauma victims, as well as media operators and journalists. We started a dialogue on how to deal with this fundamental dilemma of keeping public discourse open while managing hate speech at a very tough moment. We quickly realized that it was not only a matter of media regulation and policy, but also a question of practice. There was clear

³ Afrobarometer Data, Round 7. 2016/18. [\[Link\]](#).

⁴ Association des Radios Communautaires. [\[Link\]](#).

abuse and hate speech, but there were also challenges in training journalists and reaching a shared understanding of what was acceptable and not in the broadcast space.

In the online space, everything was very new. It was a time in the country when the online sector was exploding. Even my own phone here in Washington was exploding with various, horrific images, reports, and rumors of crimes and atrocities. Because the online space was new, we brought in youth, tech bloggers, and power users in the country to discuss ideal norms in the online space.

Building Capacity to Deal with Conflict. Alongside this multi-stakeholder process to articulate what the shared rules of the game should be and how society should respond to the surge in hate and rumors, the group also started to build capacity to manage broadcast media.

Imagine that you are a Central African radio DJ or talk show host and that you open up the phone lines for listener calls. A woman calls in and says that her son was killed atrociously, expressing some very deep and truly felt anger. She blames Christians or Muslims for the crime and says what she thinks should happen to those responsible. These conversations happen in real life. So, as a radio host, how do you handle the situation? What do you say to the emotional mother? If she implies that there should be revenge, what do you say? What is acceptable? What is not acceptable? What responsibility do you, the station managers, or the regulators have?

We worked with radio hosts, and it's been a really remarkable experience. In our initial baseline, we found that only 47% of media professionals did not feel confident in managing hate speech, and only 65% felt that they had no plan. We worked to build skills to handle these tough situations, and we have seen results. This year, at mid-year, there were only five cases of hate speech down from 30 the year before. Defamation cases were down by 75%.⁵ On top of our own evaluations, independent media watchdogs who monitor these issues, such as the Observatoire des Medias Centrafricains, reported a marked improvement.

Policy Options and Actions

There are five lessons to draw that are appropriate for U.S. policy and can use some Congressional follow up and action.

- 1) *Appropriate Aims of Assistance.* As we look to U.S. support to institutions in this space—whether that from government institutions, media institutions, or schools; whether via funding from the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the State Department, USAID, civic education groups, international visitors and exchange programs, or public affairs outreach from local embassies—we should maintain the north star aim of leveraging assistance to create environments in which people can disagree

⁵ Search for Common Ground, *“Be Africa ti ye ti la so” Program Reporting*. Available upon request.

well. Support to media institutions should not be directed towards creating an environment where everyone agrees with each other; where a particular viewpoint dominates; or censor opinions we might find objectionable, but to elevate the conversation and build the capacity to manage diverse perspectives. Being able to disagree well about faith is one of the biggest sources of communal and societal resilience.

- 2) *Social Impact Entertainment*. While the State Department and USAID have provided valuable assistance in the media and religious freedom sectors, much of this assistance is designed to be quite cerebral: for example, support to journalists to report on factual issues, or advocacy groups to gather around policy issues. All of that is very good. At the same time, we know that the reasons that people participate in violence, or why they might support exclusionary measures, are not only intellectual. Political attitudes and participation in violence are also driven by positive and negative life experiences; attitudes towards their own group and other groups; the personalities of role models, and more. To address these aspects, the field of Social Impact Entertainment can play a much-needed role.⁶ Elsewhere, we have seen the power of a soap opera in Myanmar that features a Muslim character⁷ and a school program in Indonesia that encourages dialogue between Christians and Muslims.⁸ These programs set different kinds of examples of what is accepted and expected through the creative arts.
- 3) *Norms and Technological Change*. A billion people are going to come online between 2017 and 2021.⁹ A very large percentage of those users will come from Africa, many in fundamentally deeply divided societies. We have seen some of the harm that happened in the online space in other parts of the world. Rural Central African Republic, the Mali-Niger-Burkina border region, and South Sudan, to name a few, are just as divided as Myanmar and Sri Lanka. When those societies come online, online communities will reflect existing divisions. Who will set the norms so we do not see more spillover between online discourse and offline violence? In many places, the first one million of the first billion will determine the online experience. As the first 15 people come online from a particular village in the Central African Republic, everyone else who is joining the online community and receiving their friend requests is going to follow the behavior of those people. Now, while the digital community is small, is when we should be looking at the trendsetters, because the behavior of these people will shape the experience for

⁶ UCLA Skoll Center, 2019. *The State of SIE: Mapping the Landscape of Social Impact Entertainment*. [\[Link\]](#)

⁷ Search for Common Ground, 2017. *Reconciliation in Myanmar: Bridging the Divides with Cultural Expression, Final Evaluation*. [\[Link\]](#)

⁸ Search for Common Ground, 2016. *Youth Ambassadors for Tolerance and Religious Diversity, Evaluation*. [\[Link\]](#)

⁹ Bain & Company, 2017. *Where Will the Next Big Wave of Internet Users Come From?* [\[Link\]](#)

everyone who comes after them. We all wish each other happy birthday on Facebook because Harvard kids started doing so 15 years ago. The same kind of online experience is playing out now across Africa. In these societies, what the small group of connected power users are doing today will shape what millions of people conform to fifteen years from now.

- 4) *Comprehensive Focus on Fragility.* We know that some of the greatest and most egregious violations to religious freedom occur in societies that are experiencing violent conflict. Even in contexts like the DRC, Central African Republic, Somalia, and the Sahel where religious differences may not be the sole cause of social conflicts, religion can be used as an instrument by violent entrepreneurs to drive support for their cause. Efforts to strengthen religious freedom and address violence based on religious identity should be coupled with more comprehensive efforts to address the wider chronic crises. To that end, we need Congress to support the administration in taking strong action to move the Global Fragility Act (GFA). The GFA cleared the House and passed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee overwhelmingly. We are hopeful that the Act will get a Senate vote so that President Trump can sign it into law. A focus on these chronically fragile states will save money by reducing the need for humanitarian assistance and will affirm the U.S. as a country that upholds human dignity and supports healthy, safe, and just societies where religious freedom can flourish.
- 5) *Support Positive Examples.* As concerned as we are about violations and negative actions, Congress should also support—and create tools to support—positive examples. For example, as it relates to the Central African Republic, we hope that the House will move to a vote on bipartisan resolution HR 387 calling for increased support for justice in the country and support to overcome some of the fractions that the country has experienced. As we start planning for the appropriations cycle, we need Congress to give State and USAID the tools to support civil society and creative media efforts to protect human rights and promote tolerance and reconciliation in some of the hardest places. That means adequately supporting the Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRDF) to protect democracy and human rights; the Conflict Management and Mitigation People-to-People Reconciliation program to support conflict and post-conflict recovery; and the rapid-response Complex Crisis Fund.